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THE
BALLAD OF
THE BROWN GIRL

AN OLD BALLAD
RETOLD





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THE BALLAD OF THE BROWN GIRL

AN OLD BALLAD RETOLD

by

COUNTEE CULLEN

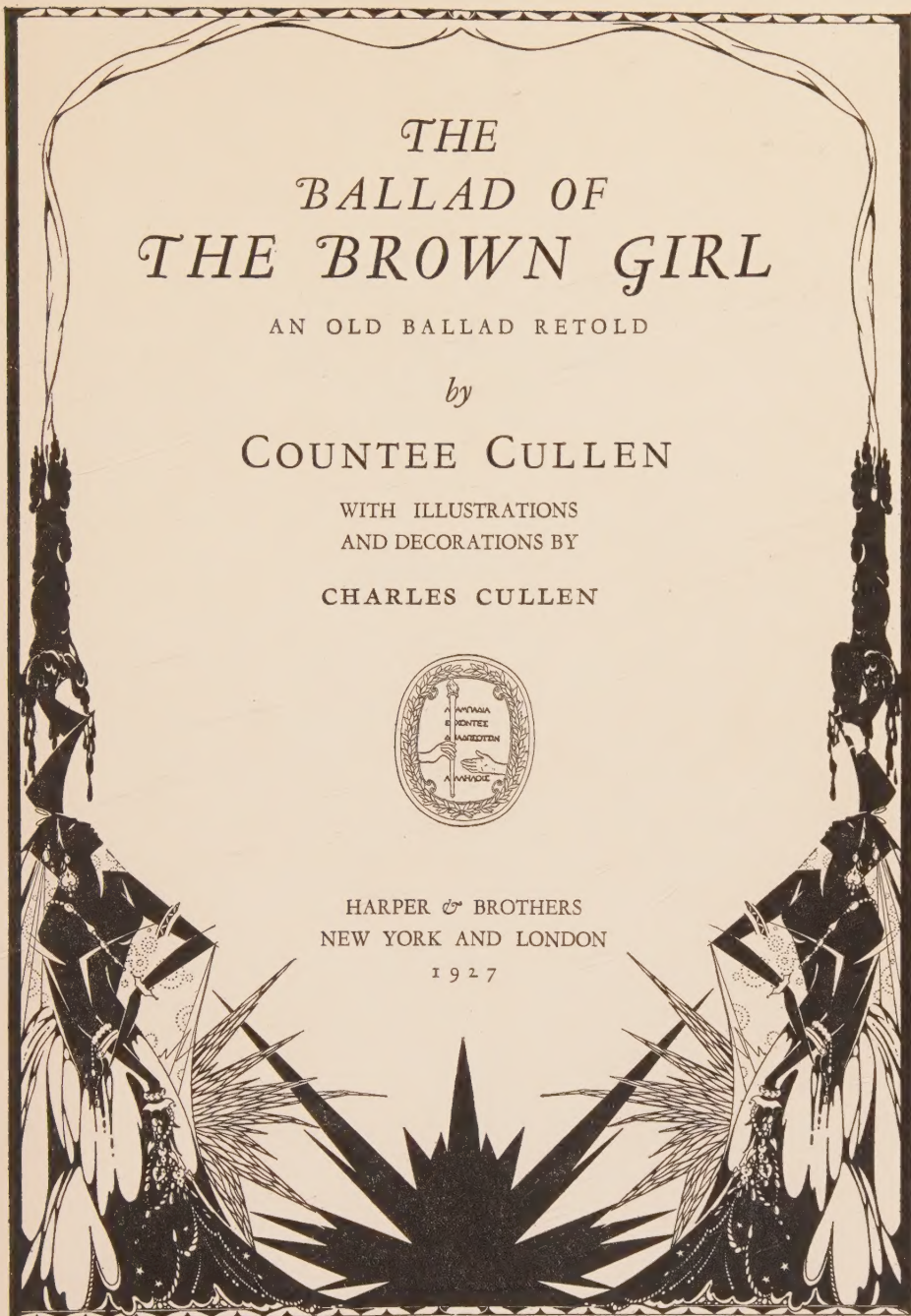
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
AND DECORATIONS BY

CHARLES CULLEN



HARPER & BROTHERS
NEW YORK AND LONDON

1927



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THE BALLAD OF THE BROWN GIRL

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FIRST EDITION

E-B

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To WITTER BYNNER

*THE
BALLAD OF
THE BROWN GIRL*



H, THIS is the tale the grandams tell
In the land where the grass is blue,
And some there are who say 'tis false,
And some that hold 'it true.

Lord Thomas on a summer's day
Came to his mother's door;
His eyes were ringed for want of sleep;
His heart was troubled sore.

He knelt him at his mother's side;
She stroked his curly head.
"I've come to be advised of you;
Advise me well," he said.

"For there are two who love me well—
I wot it from each mouth—
And one's Fair London, lily maid,
And pride of all the south.



She is full shy and sweet as still
Delight when nothing stirs;
My soul can thrive on love of her,
And all my heart is hers."

His mother's slender fingers ploughed
Dark furrows through his hair,
"The other one who loves you well,
Is she as sweet and fair?"

"She is the dark Brown Girl who knows
No more-defining name,
And bitter tongues have worn their tips
In sneering at her shame."

"But there are lands to go with her,
And gold and silver stores."
His mother whispered in his ear,
"And all her heart is yours."

His mother loved the clink of gold,
The odor and the shine
Of larders bowed with venison
And crystal globes of wine.

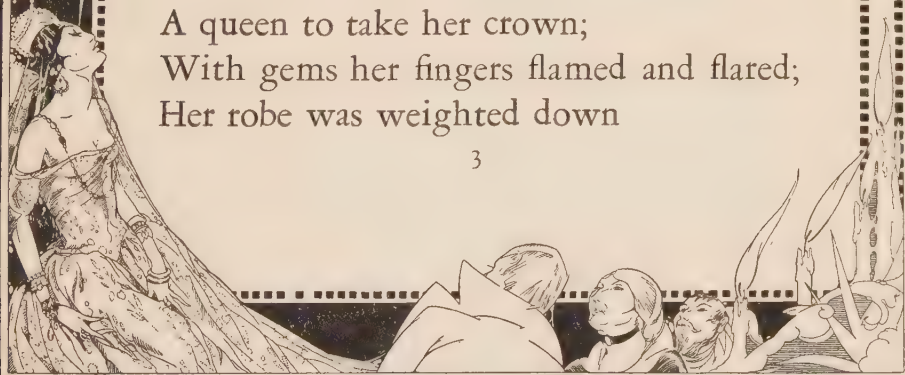
“Oh, love is good,” the lady quoth,
“When berries ripe and sweet,
From every bush and weighted vine
Are crying, ‘Take and eat’.”

“But what is best when winter comes
Is gold and silver bright;
Go bring me home the nut-brown maid
And leave the lily-white.”

He sent his criers through the land
To cry his wedding day,
But bade them at Fair London’s road
To turn the other way.

His bridal day dawned white and fair,
His heart held night within;
He heard its anguished beats above
The jocund wedding din.

The Brown Girl came to him as might
A queen to take her crown;
With gems her fingers flamed and flared;
Her robe was weighted down



Her hair was black as sin is black
And ringed about with fire;
Her eyes were black as night is black
When moon and stars conspire;
Her mouth was one red cherry clipt
In twain, her voice a lyre.

Lord Thomas took her jewelled hand,
The holy words were said,
And they have made the holy vow
To share one board and bed.

But suddenly the furious feast
Is shattered with a shout;
Lord Thomas trembles at the word,
"Fair London is without."

All pale and proud she stands without,
And will not venture in;
He leaves the side of his nut-brown bride
To bid her enter in.

Her skin was white as almond milk
Slow trickling from the flower;
Her frost-blue eyes were darkening
Like clouds before a shower;





*He picked its strings and played a tune
And sang it to the dead.*

Her thin pink lips were twin rosebuds
That had not come to flower,
And crowning all, her golden hair
Was loosened out in shower.

He has taken her by her slim white hand,
(Oh, light was her hand in his)
But the touch ran wild and fierce and hot,
And burned like a brand in his.

"Lord Thomas," she said; her voice was low,
"I come unbidden here,
But I have come to see your bride
And taste your bridal cheer."

He has taken her by her slim white hand
And led her to his bride,
And brown and white have bent them low,
And sat them side by side.

He has brimmed a cup with the wedding
wine,
He has placed it in her hand,
She has raised it high and smiled on him
Like love in a distant land.

"I came to see your bonny bride,
I came to wish you well,"
Her voice was clear as song is clear;
Clear as a silver bell.

"But, Thomas, Lord, is this your bride?
I think she's mighty brown;
Why didn't you marry a fair, bright girl
As ever the sun shone on?"

For only the rose and the rose should mate,
Oh, never the hare and the hound,"
And the wine he poured for her crimson
mouth

She poured upon the ground.

The flow of wine and jest has ceased,
The groom has flushed and paled,
The Brown Girl's lips are moist and red
Where her sharp white teeth assailed.



Dark wrath has climbed her nut-brown
throat,
And wrath in her wild blood sings,
But she tramples her passions underfoot
Because she comes of kings.

She has taken her stand by her rival's side,
"Lord Thomas, you have heard,
As I am yours and you are mine
By ring and plighted word,
Avenge me here on our bridal day."—
Lord Thomas spoke no word.

The Brown Girl's locks were held in place
By a dagger serpentine;
Thin it was and long and sharp,
And tempered well and fine.

And legend claimed that a dusky queen,
In a dusky dream-lit land,
Had loved in vain, and died of it,
By her own slim twilight hand.

The Brown Girl's hair has kissed her waist,
Her hand has closed on steel;
Fair London's blood has joined the wine
She sullied with her heel.

Lord Thomas caught her as she fell,
And cried, "My sweet, my fair,
Dark night has hid the golden sun,
And blood has thicked the air.

The little hand that should have worn
A golden band for me,
The little hand that fluttered so
Is still as death can be."

He bent and kissed the weeping wound
Fresh in her heart's young core,
And then he kissed her sleeping mouth
That would not waken more.

He seized the Brown Girl's rippling hair
That swung in eddies loose,
And with one circle of his arm
He made a hairy noose.

He pulled it till she swooned for pain,
And spat a crimson lake;
He pulled it till a something snapped
That was not made to break.

And her he loved he brought and
placed

By her who was his bride,
And brown and white like broken buds
Kept vigil side by side.

And one was like a white, white rose
Whose inmost heart has bled,
And one was like a red, red rose
Whose roots have witherèd.

Lord Thomas took a golden harp
That hung above his head;
He picked its strings and played a tune
And sang it to the dead.

"O lovers never barter love
For gold or fertile lands,
For love is meat and love is drink,
And love heeds love's commands."



"And love is shelter from the rain,
And scowling stormy skies;
Who casts off love must break his heart,
And rue it till he dies."

And then he hugged himself and grinned,
And laughed, "Ha, ha," for glee;
But those who watched knew he was mad,
And shudderèd to see.

And some made shift to go to him,
But there was in his eye
What made each man to turn aside
To let his neighbor by.

His mother in a satin gown
Was fain to go to him,
But his lips curled back like a gray wolf's
fang,
When the huntsmen blow to him.

"No mother of mine, for gold's the god
Before whose feet you fall;
Here be two dead who will be three,
And you have slain us all.

Go dig one grave to hold us all
And make it deep and wide;
And lay the Brown Girl at my feet,
Fair London by my side."

And as he spoke his hand went up,
And singing steel swept down,
And as its kiss betrayed his heart,
Death wore a triple crown.

And in the land where the grass is blue,
In a grave dug deep and wide,
The Brown Girl sleeps at her true lord's feet,
Fair London by his side.

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WITHDRAWN





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